

A chance encounter leads Bradley to a lifelong love of community theater

By Jonathan Pappalardo
Clipper Reporter
pappalardojon@gmail.com



Michael Bradley is an actor and teacher who enjoys community theater.

Photo by Jonathan Pappalardo

Duxbury resident and local thespian, Michael Bradley, remembers his first audition like it was yesterday.

"A friend tricked me into it," he said. "He promised me it was a small part in 'Arsenic and Old Lace.' Just a little part with five lines. Three weeks in somebody dropped out. I went from having five lines to playing Dr. Einstein."

He instantly realized he liked performing, and for the past 37 years Bradley has been in productions with a number of community theater groups in and around the Boston area. Those first performances were with the West Roxbury community theater. He has since expanded to performances with the Walpole Footlighters, Riverside Theatre Works, Needham Community Theatre and the Bay Players here in Duxbury. He recently wrapped a run in the Milton Players production of "You Can't Take It With You."

These theater groups, as Bradley explains, do not have troupe members and thus always hold open auditions for each show. He has to audition like everyone else, and there are no guarantees he will be selected for the part, which he says he sometimes finds disheartening. Bradley often works alongside people he does not know, which excites him, and is highly selective when going out for auditions.

"I don't do shows I don't like," he said. "They have to be worthwhile for me and entertaining. It's all about giving people the opportunity to see a show at a reasonable price." Bradley says his most fun role was playing Dracula 13 years ago.

"I used to like scaring myself as a kid," he said, citing favorite childhood characters including Werewolf. "My mom and family say I've been Dracula since I was 5 years old."

A performance of "Dracula" turned memorable when another actor, in character, gave the audience more than they bargained for.

"Mr. Harker was outside and set off the smoke alarms in the middle of the show," he said. "They asked me to go out and help. I was in full costume, what could I do? The firemen had to come and turn everything off. Amazingly, the audience stayed. They were cool about it and figured things were OK. They thought it was planned. Why would we plan it?"

His love of performing in community theater productions, which Bradley says, "is a great hobby to have," has amounted to more than 50 shows throughout his career. In his younger years, he says he would perform two shows a year. Now he only does one.

"It takes a lot of time," he said. "Three nights a week for eight to 10 weeks. It's a commitment. You have to memorize your lines. It takes a lot."

Bradley freely admits he is not a musical person. He hates singing and smiling in front of people, despite having sung in a few choruses and being able to carry a tune. His main passion is

comedy, a pursuit he has loved since he was a kid watching comedians do voices on the “Ed Sullivan Show.”

“I like old-school situation comedy,” he said. “ ‘The Odd Couple’ ” was a lot of fun.” Sometimes his nerves got the better of him.

“I blanked out on stage during a performance of ‘Angel Street,’ he said, discussing stage fright. “I was playing Inspector Rough. I was supposed to say something, turned to my female co-star and asked, ‘what was that you said?’ And we got back on track.”

Outside of the performing arts, Bradley, who grew up in West Roxbury, has made a living in education. He taught the English language in Dedham to English Language learners to kids from the Department of Youth Services, beginning in his mid-20s. Although he is now retired, Bradley is waiting to hear about an influx of kids coming from Puerto Rico whom he could assist with his skill set.

“I didn’t want to be a teacher,” he said. “But I was good at it and I liked it.”

Meanwhile, he recalls meeting the friend who tricked him into that fateful audition years ago. It was in 1968, on their first day of high school at Boston Latin, an all boys’ school at the time. They were already bonded, unbeknownst to him.

“Our grandmothers were best friends in Roxbury in the 1940s. His mom and my aunt went to high school together. Years later, a woman in Walpole said a guy in our theater group reminds me of you. I asked his name. I said I’ve known him since 1968. He knew I was funny.”

The past 37 years have been good to Bradley. He has had the opportunity to play “great characters,” including Felix from “The Odd Couple” and Drummond from “Inherit The Wind,” and make solid friendships that have lasted well beyond the stage. There is camaraderie among theater groups, a supportive environment in which actors alert each other to auditions through a network of community boards. He also taught a theater class at the Marshfield Senior Center last spring.

As far as the culture of community theater goes, Bradley says it is stronger than ever. There is practically one community theater in every town now, which was not the case in the early 1980s. He says the high cost of seeing a show in Boston is a contributing factor to the rise in popularity.

A few theaters, he says, have blossomed in Plymouth Center, including one in a church.

“They are a great thing to bring to a community,” he says. “Why not? It’s theater in the comfort of your own neighborhood.”

Still, he says, there are challenges. Some people are still leery of what they will get for their money. Bradley suggests everyone check out a show.

As for him, if anything catches his eye with a program either the Bay Players or Walpole Footlighters is staging, you may be able to catch him in a production before too long.

“Theater groups continue to compete for audiences and support,” he said. “People are always surprised at the quality and that there are different guys doing the lights, the props, the sound. They’re not lacking for talented people.”